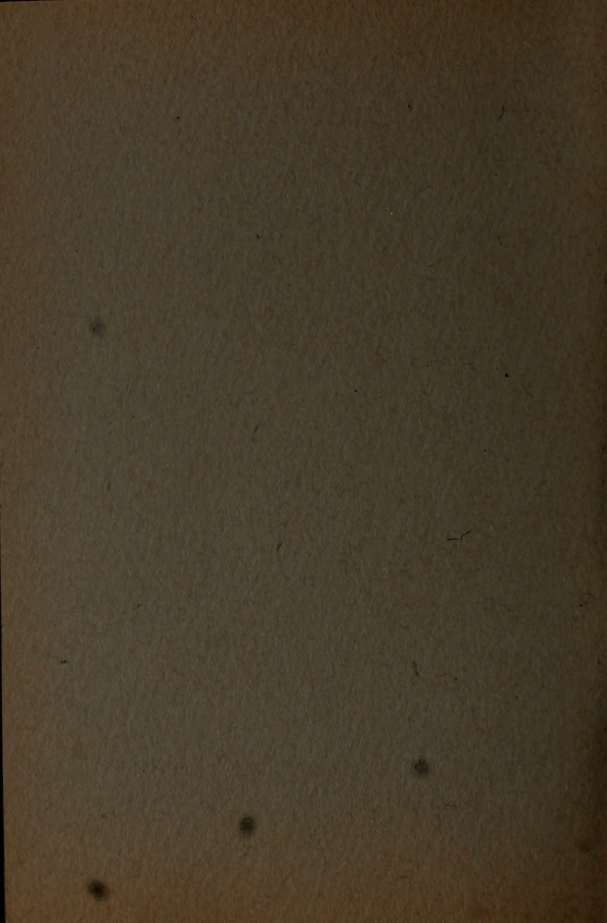


LITTLE BLUE BOOK NO. 906
Edited by E. Haldeman-Julius

**A Devil of a Fellow
and
The Yellow Cat**

Wilbur Daniel Steele



LITTLE BLUE BOOK NO. 906
Edited by E. Haldeman-Julius

**A Devil of a Fellow
and
The Yellow Cat**

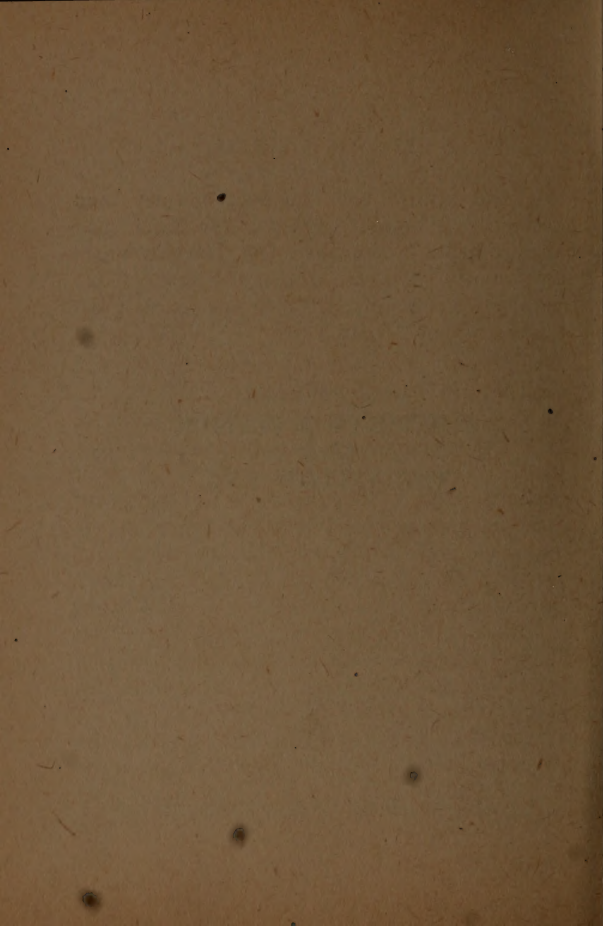
Wilbur Daniel Steele

**HALDEMAN-JULIUS PUBLICATIONS
GIRARD, KANSAS**

Copyright, 1918,
By Harper and Brothers
Reprinted by Arrangement

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

A DEVIL OF A FELLOW
AND
THE YELLOW CAT



A DEVIL OF A FELLOW

He had always been spoiled, by men, and especially by women. Even in the name they called him in Portuguese Old Harbor, down cape, there was a ring of irrepressible triumph—"Va Di! Va Di!"—as it were, "a devil of a fellow," or "a gay bird."

They had been dead for more than half a year, he and Stiff Peter—dead, that is, in the knowledge of the home world. And as befitting one out of the unknown, he returned more magnificent than ever, stepping down the fruit steamer's plank at the Boston dock dressed in a suit of cream-colored flannels gotten in the tropics, between which and the pale block of the Panama hat above, his face showed more than ever swarthy, rich-toned, and clean-drawn, with its crisp black spurs of mustache breaking the line of either cheek, like a brigand on a poster. In his right hand he poised a slender cane, something he had learned in Port au Prince. Stiff Peter came behind, carrying the new straw suitcase, clothed himself in much the same sort of shoddy in which he and his captain had been picked up from the fisherman's

wreckage, seven months before, by a southward-going tramp. Stiff Peter was a small fellow; he had to look up to Va Di; had he had to look down to Va Di the world would have been quite inexplicable.

The pair stood outside the dock gates, staring about them at the heavy summer city, the venders of colored fruits, the hot blue Elevated trains thundering overhead, the ice-carts sweating long, cold threads across the cobbles.

"Here's the country fer you, eh, Peter?"

Peter nodded, showing his bad teeth. "Betcha!"

The master pointed the tips of his mustache and smiled easily at a passing shop-girl. "Say, Peter, I a'most wisht now I didn't send that letter home. Be some sport, now, coming ashore into Old Harbor, like a—miracle."

"Betcha!" The little fellow grinned, thinking that would have been fine. "I wisht you didn't, either," he echoed. The fact that Peter himself had sent the letter, Va Di never having learned to read or write, did not obtrude itself upon either of them. Peter waited patiently, eyes on the cobbles.

"Well, Peter, we'll see a night afore we go down home, anyhow. Wonder who'll be to

Schlinsky's? Them boys off the fleet 'll be tickled to see me."

"Betcha!"

Outside Schlinsky's place they were confronted by a slovenly jointed man whose little, red-rimmed eyes seemed to be looking at ghosts.

"Thousand devils!" the fellow gasped in his long throat.

Va Di straightened the left lapel of his coat and flicked a damp curl from his forehead. No one enjoyed this sort of thing more than he.

"Hello, Costa! How's fishin'—good? Any the boys done good this year?"

"But for Gawd's s-a-k-e!" Costa stretched out an absurdly long finger to touch the flannel stuff. "And is that Stiff Peter?" His eyes wobbled about in a grotesque fashion. "Say, you fellahs is *drowned*!"

He closed his eyes tight and mopped the sweat from his brow with the back of a wrist. "I was onto the *Arbitrator* myself las' fall when she picked up your wreckage. Me and Tony Silva caught a dory-load o' corpses ourselves. The hull o' you's got good granite stones up to the graveyard. And here you come tackin' up to me in broad daylight." He popped his

eyes very suddenly at the conclusion, as if to give nature a chance.

"And you never *knowed*?" Va Di demanded, losing his dramatic composure.

"*Knowed what?*"

"*Knowed* we was picked up, me and Peter, and took to Brazil."

Costa shook his head uneasily, still a little suspicious of them.

"But looky here, didn't— Who was it I sent that letter to, Peter? Mamie Cabral? Say, man, didn't Mamie get no letter offa me? Eh?"

"N-n-naw." Costa's face changed abruptly from pale brown to brick color and his unmanageable fingers fussed with his beard. "Mamie's went—"

"*Went? Went where?*"

"Nowheres. Only she went an' got married."

"*Got married?*"

"Got married."

"*Onto who?*"

"Onto that old storekeep, Henny Lake—you know."

"Old Henny Lake with the crooked leg? Looky here, Costa—"

Costa backed away a step, licked his lips, fumbled uneasily in and out of his pockets, and

after a moment spoke in a voice unnecessarily loud:

"Come on up an' have a drink, Va Di, old fellah." He slapped the other on the back crying: "There's other fish into the water, man!"

"You go straight to hell!"

Va Di stood for a long time after Costa had retreated up the stairway, scowling into the yellow sun of evening, his teeth playing with his nether lips, his hands tormenting the frail Malacca.

"They—they's other fish into the water," Peter stammered, desperate to shift the great man's humor. Va Di wheeled with out-flung hands.

"Other fish! Well, I *guesso*. Mary Virgin! but I got a dozen girls in town, right here, better 'n that run-around slut that jumps after an old man's money the minute I get out o' sight. Fish? I *guesso*! Come on up, Stiff Peter. I'll show 'em."

He mounted the dusty stairs, with Peter sweating after him, and in the wide, many-tabled hall of the Jew, heavy with the arid lushness of a summer night in the city, he drank himself into a heroic insensibility, so that he had to be carried away to dark T

Wharf, in the willing hands of the fish fleet, and dumped aboard a schooner bound down on the morning tide for the end of the Cape.

They opened the town around Long Point, a straggling arc of infinitesimal houses and wharves and spires, all colored alike in the sulphur fires of sunset, with here and there a gleam of clear flame refracted from a window-pane, a whole broadside from the cold-storage in the western sands.

"Seven month," Peter mused, an eye corner-wise on the silent man beside him in the bows. "Seven month; and it's like yiste'day—er mebbby ten, twenty year, lookin' at it another way, eh, Cap'n?"

"They'll be took aback," Va Di muttered, rousing himself from his sour preoccupation. "I'm goin' to see the Silvado girls tonight, Peter. You watch their faces, now. Fish into the water—I guesso." He fell into another silence, broken only by the faint rustle of the cutwater and the tiny crescendo of men's voices as the bow gang straggled forward to make the anchor ready. The fleet at mooring drifted nearer, spiring purple on a mat of pellucid gold.

"I see Maya's shifted his offshore trap," Peter struggled patiently.

The tide was low when the dories came

ashore, leaving a wide stretch of flats, soggy, half-reflecting. Two of the crew, to tell of it afterward, carried Va Di on their shoulders and saved his white shoes from the wet, their own boots leaving tiny lakes behind, full of yellow sky. A bare-legged girl with a clam-rake in her hand turned curiously as she crossed in front of them, opened her eyes wider, ran away blushing richly, the damp skirts flinging about her knees.

Va Di called after her: "Ai there, you Angie! You watch out for me."

People began to come out on the stranded wharves; some padded across the flats, hallooing to one another. At the "rising," Va Di kicked to be let down, and stood with the great hat held dramatically across his breast, watching the townspeople converging upon him. A party of summer visitors from the East End passed in a motor; one of them, a handsome woman of forty or so, smiled amusedly at the figure, flushed and tightened her lips as she found her smile returned with a shocking candor, made to pluck her companion's sleeve, thought better of it, lowered her eyes to her lap, and so whirled on into nothingness.

"Le' me alone," Va Di cried with a sudden ferocity. "Peter, gi' me that dress-suit case."

Grasping the shiny thing he wheeled and strode away into the mouth of a lane, leaving lips and eyes wondering behind him.

The day died very suddenly now. Passing beneath the willows that hung out of Ma Deutra's chicken-pen, it was almost night already, cool and struck through with the acrid feter of the roots; and when he came out beyond, the world's color had changed perceptibly, its passion chilled by the faint white influence of the moon. Turning into the back street, he paused before a small weathered building with "Henry Lake, Merchandise & Provisions" lettered across the false front.

"Shut up a'ready," he mused, with a hard-won sneer. "Stays home of evenin's *now*—the old bastard. I'll wring his dried-up neck—you watch."

He moved on again, smoothing out his coat-folds and tipping the Panama further back and to the side, for he had to pass the house now. The perfectly inexplicable thing was that he should find himself so upset over Mamie Cabral—*Mamie Cabral*—a good-enough girl, but . . . He walked along the white pickets of the fence, shoulders squared back, heartrending chin thrust forward in a heroic preoccupation, eyes fastened on the moon where Fergus's willows

chopped it into ragged white fragments. But, somehow, he could not get past the gate; he faltered there, set down the suitcase, and leaned his elbows on the posts.

Through all the years of his boyhood he had played around that house of Lake's; later he had stalked past it going to or from his various vessels. And yet he could not have told any one definitely what it looked like. He retained a dim impression of a grape-vine, that was all. Now he looked at it for the first time with eyes of interest, intense glowering interest. The vine, shooting thick and rough from the ground near the front door and sprawling haphazard over the dimming whiteness of the walls till it came to the semi-restraint of a pergola, touched the man's ponderous imagination and made him think of a snake, or a kind of guardian dragon.

"And them two are in there," he mumbled to himself. "Into the dark." He leaned still more heavily on the gate-post, his garments melting into the luminous streak of the fence, his dark, working face invisible against a further hedge, only that monstrous exotic bloom of a hat hanging in the dusk, air-sustained.

"Tony! Oh—Oh, Tony Va Di!"

The low cry came from the side of the house where a bay window sheltered beneath the vine-

strangled pergola. Va Di stood up rigid, leaning slightly backward as if before a blow, his tongue running over his lips. He muttered, "Name of God!"

The cry repeated itself, half in appeal, half ecstatic.

"Ton'! Ton'!"

Opening the gate, careless now of who might see or hear him, he strode along the nasturtium-bordered walk and stood beneath the pergola, staring at the window slightly above the level of his head.

She was kneeling inside, so that no more than her head was visible against the interior darkness, and her forearms crossed on the sill, bare and brown and sweetly modeled. The last dim effulgence of the sunset warmed her right cheek, the other was chilled by the waxing power of the moon—like the two phases of a man's passion. Neither seemed to have any words, save those scared, triumphant articulations of their eyes. So they gazed at each other for a long time, while the knotted shadows of the vine established themselves upon the ground and the house-side, austere and grotesque.

A slow bewilderment took hold of Va Di; something began to flutter in the back of his brain, an intolerable, weightless thudding, and

the pupils of his eyes dilated curiously. He could not understand. He had an instinctive desire to huddle down or to turn and run away, as a coral-islander might feel, put down miraculously in the midst of the Himalayas.

"Where—where is he?" he whispered, by and by.

"He's dead, Tony."

"Dead!"

"Three days, Ton'."

The man took off his hat and stared into it; vaguely astonished at a jewel shining on the brim, he raised his hand to find tears rolling out of his eyes. He had an almost uncontrollable impulse to pray.

"Old Lake's dead," he echoed in a shallow, vacant voice. Sluggish visions tumbled through his mind as he stared at Mamie's dark, unmoving eyes.

"Wha'—what was ailin' of him?"

"I killed him."

The air about the open window grew dank and old, shot with a faint reek of never-opened rooms, unaired wall-paper, crumbs of funeral cakes and spilled wine, and a memory hanging about it of withered old dead limbs. Va Di shrank back till his shoulders touched an upright of the pergola. His face was yellow in

the half-light and one yellow finger scratched a cross on his breast.

"You—y-y-you—"

"I killed him, Ton'—after I got your letter."

If she would take her eyes away for an instant, then he could run.

"You—got it—then?"

She nodded slowly.

"I didn't tell nobody. Why? I don't know, Ton'. But then I prayed to all the saints that he would die, and to the Blessed Virgin, and even to Christ Hissself—and three days ago he fell off Maya's wharf and drowned."

"O-o-oh!" It was not tears now that wet his cheeks, but sweat, released suddenly from its pores. "They can't git—you—for—*that*."

"They can't. *They* can't. No. But—"

For all the frightful, occult implication of her words, her eyes were still level and unfrightened, full of a deep, transfigured calm. Va Di could not live up to that; without ceasing he crossed himself and looked out of the corners of his eyes, as though fearful of beholding in that moon-checkered nook the form of a black, relentless priest.

"Oh, Ton'!" she called, softly. He had to look at her, and even the cold exhalations of the night light could not kill the color sweeping her

cheeks. He became aware of her hand reaching out to him, wavering close before him; heedless of all things else, earthly and unearthly, he took it in his own and turned it over and kissed the palm—kissed it over and over again till it smothered him.

"Mamie!" he cried, searching her face with his reckless eyes. "You're mine, ain't you, Mame? Ain't you?" He came nearer and stood on tiptoe to draw down her lips, but she went white at that and pulled back, fluttering her free hand over her bosom.

"Ton'—Ton'! Don't! I—I ain't—smart—Tony."

He stood perfectly quiet for a moment, as if stuck there in stone by a flash of some Medusa-head. After a time, becoming aware that he still held the girl's hand in his, he let it drop abruptly. He began working his lips, as if they were stiff from long disuse. His face was yellow and hard.

"The hell you say!"

Turning away, he walked around the corner of the house, a singular woodenness in his knees. But he returned immediately to lean against the upright and confront her with his blighted rancor.

"You didn't waste no time, did you?"

She did not appear to have grasped it yet. Once again he flung off around the corner, and this time he did not return.

When he came into his own lane, gated with clumpy willows and at the further end fading out into the blue-white slope of a dune dotted with rubbish, he saw that the news had run ahead of him and all the neighborhood was out of doors in the dusty thoroughfare, shouting, sobbing, squealing. His mother lunged forward at sight of him, an old, ragged-haired woman, full of fecund years, tripping over the torn hem of her skirt.

Va Di glowered at her, holding her off with his strong hands. She had been handsome once too; even now there were fine foundation-lines which the folds of her cheeks, red and rutted like a rooster's wattles, could not altogether hide.

"Ma!" he cried, of a sudden. "Ma, I'm back." Folding her in his arms, he patted her back with a rough tenderness, and wept. Then all the others, who had come pattering, fell to weeping and screeching and pounding *him* on the back. They got, finally, into the house, a bleak, tall, narrow structure with peeling clapboards without and a pervasion of linoleum within; into the kitchen, full of all the essen-

tials of life, a stove, a pump, a lithograph of the Virgin, a mahogany wardrobe leaking cornmeal and onions, a phonograph, cot-bed, chairs, and a table.

Eight brothers and sisters had to be heard; a ninth came running from her husband's house up-street, her stolid velocity not in the least hampered by the protuberance under her shawl, understood to be a nursing infant, miraculously adhesive.

"You'll git the house painted," she murmured, with a hint of severity, to Angelina, seventeen, and in high school.

"Yeh." Angelina had thought of that herself, having callers.

His mother busied herself in an oily nimbus above the stove, frying a *linguisa* and other things, watching her first-born all the while with convulsive tremors about her mouth which made her appear to grin, at intervals, idiotically. Va Di pounded the red table-cloth with the butt of his knife.

"Ma, git a move onto that. Ain't I told you I'm hungry?"

"Well, ain't I hurryin'?" The old woman made the *linguisa* crackle by poking it with a knife.

Va Di rubbed the back of his hand across his lips and justified himself. "Well, I'm hungry."

He ate in silence, only once raising his voice, and his hands, to bid the company be quiet. "You make me nervous," he cried. After he had finished he got up and dusted the crumbs off his fine clothes, scratching an old spot with a thumbnail and rubbing it with his coat-cuff, ran a hand through his straight, black hair, and lounged to the front door. His mother called after him, with a curious cluck in her voice.

"Where you goin', son?"

"Aw, see the town."

But he got no farther than the step to the gate, where he leaned on his elbows and gloomed at the roofs across the lane. Curious ones passed, turned back, cleared their throats, and, seeing his face, did not speak.

"A kid," he mumbled in his throat. "A kid off o' that crooked-legged old sow." And after another sour silence: "I never remembered what a good-looker she was. Say! And crazy about me. But . . . Hell!"

The moon swam high over the end of the lane, filling the dusty passage with its effulgent silver. The clear notes of town hall telling eleven floated across the huddled dwellings,

and Va Di, wondering at the hour, looked about to find all the windows dark in the lane, save one toward the street end where a mandolin twinkled an Island melody. A solitary figure moved in the vista, coming nearer, a girl, dark-faced and with her dark hair piled on either side of her ears, wearing a white linen skirt and a crimson sweater. Opposite Va Di's gate she paused to kick a twig lying in the dust and discovered the man with a slight start.

"I heard you're back," she said, drifting easily nearer. "Glad t' see you."

The man smoothed his mustache. "Hullo, Mary! Didn't 'spect to see me again, eh, girlie? How's things?"

"Lookin' up, *now*." She leaned against the other side of the fence, smiling and fussing idly with her hair, her eyes lowered demurely. By and by she raised them, nonplussed by his failure to go on, and found him staring at the sky as if he had forgotten she was there. She drifted away, after a time, flinging her shoulders a little, and once looking back with a wounded, malignant expression.

Va Di shook himself and stared after her, moved by a faint sensation of regret. "I must be turnin' foolish," he muttered to himself.

For a moment he thought she was coming

back, and straightened up with a not unaccountable thrill. But then he sank down again, recognizing old Baldy Minn by a faint flapping of soles, many sizes too large for her, on the dust. Baldy Minn had a wide, gelatinous person, forever billowing and breaking against the precarious dams of her clothing when she moved about; a silky gray beard blurred the contour of her chin; her small eyes floated in a brownish liquor, prying, inquisitorial, continually suspicious of women's figures, seeming to say: "Mmmm—so you're at it again. Don't lie about it, because you can't fool *me*." A most horrible old woman. She came flapping through the moonlight and stopped in front of the gate.

"Ai, ai!" she greeted, in a strong, bubbly voice. "They telled me you're back, Va Di. Too much f' the devil, was y'u? Well, blessed saints take pity onto the maids, if they's any lef' . . . Is y'r ma up?"

"I dunno." Va Di was a little afraid of this woman, and disliked her accordingly. "I'll take a look," he mumbled, after enduring her eyes for a moment. He turned to the door and called: "Ma! Hey there, *ma*!"

A sudden faint crash sounded from the other end of the house, as if some one had started out of a doze and knocked something over.

"Huh, Tony! That you, Tony?"

"A'right," Va Di grumbled. "You c'n go in, Baldy Minn. . . . Say—" He peered at the bundle swinging in her hand, an old shawl full and exuding ragged ends of things. "Say, what you want, this time o' night?"

The old crone turned within the entry and winked a leering eye. "That big kittle o' y'r ma's," she bubbled.

"Oh! O-o-oh, I git y'u! Who is it this time, Baldy Minn?"

The woman grinned and flapped a hand at him with a horrible coyness.

"None o' your beezness, *anyhow*."

After a time, driven by an unaccountable restlessness, he moved into the house, felt his way softly along a wall, and stood in what had been meant for the dining-room. The air was heavy and sour with the sleeping of the three younger boys, but the door was open a crack into the kitchen, and in the lean, bright aperture he could see Baldy Minn's face with all its dewlaps shivering.

"I knowed it all along," she was saying. "I knowed she'd never carry it—ugh-ugh—not outa that old crook-leg."

The boards groaned ever so slightly beneath Va Di's heels.

His mother's voice came through the crack, heavy with the burden of ages.

"I've hear of seven-monthers livin'."

"I kep' one myself." The midwife's lips sucked in and exploded with a suggestion of defiance. "Mis' Deutra claims she kep' one oncet, but she never. Sam Raphael's boy's a seven-monther an' *I* kep' *him*, an' don' you let nobody tell y'u diff'nt, Annie. . . . But a six-monther—ugh-ugh. No."

Va Di's mother had borne sixteen and brought up ten. He heard her now, moaning gently through her apron: "Well, well, I don't know—I don't know. . . . I go 'long with you, Baldy Minn. Poor thing! Poor thing! I put my shawl, go 'long with you, Baldy Minn."

"Naw; ain't no need, Annie. I got Angie Bragg up there now, an' Rosie Courier's there, anyhow. Gimme the kittle. She ought to be comin' 'long now. Rosie come down two hour ago." She stood for a moment ringing the huge kettle with a thumb-nail. "Won'er what started her up. She ain't fell or nothin' *I* hear of. Well . . ."

She flapped away along the dark hall, not a yard from the silent man, humming and bubbling between her gums. There was a long hush, broken *only* by the snores of the sleepers

and the continuous, subdued moaning from the kitchen, like the chant of a vigil. Va Di went out as softly as he had come in, and stood by the gate, fanning his face with the big hat.

"Damn!" he mumbled. And after a moment, "'Tain't none o' *my* fun'ral, though."

Putting the hat on his head, he opened the gate, turned aimlessly toward the back country, and mounted the clear, blue slope of the dune, picking his way mechanically among the scattered tomato-cans and disemboweled bedticks and skeletons of barrels. Sitting down on the crest, he became part of it, moon-colored and still. The night was so intolerably quiet that the ground-swell eating the beaches far off on the outside crept in to him, and he ruffled the sand with his feet because it made him think of his mother's moaning and her words: "Poor thing! Poor thing!"

"God! how that girl looked at me!" he remembered out loud. "She l-l—"

He jumped up and shuffled around; rolled a cigarette, wetting it too much with his tongue so that it fell apart; threw it away. "She l-l-loves me," he came out, more racked by the word than ever a child by his virgin oath.

He found himself at the foot of the dune on the other side, his canvas shoes sucking up

moisture from a bog. He climbed another hill, drawn back toward the town, and waded across it knee-deep in scrub and wild roses that tore triangular rents in his flannel trousers. Descending into the shadow of familiar trees, he hunched himself up to sit on the shingles of a pigsty, and heard the sluggish animals, whose distant forebears he had beaten with furtive barrel-staves, grunt and roll over in the interior muck.

He took out his knife and whittled the shingles, trying not to look at the house. There was something incredibly fearful about its being awake in the midst of all the sleepers, staring him down with its lighted windows, profligate of kerosene and tallow. The kitchen door was open; by and by a woman came and leaned in the bright rectangle, a silhouette of fatigue. This was Rosie Courier. She had been old Henny Lake's housekeeper as long as Va Di could remember. Sometimes she had served in the store. Va Di could think of her, immensely tall and tight-garmented, behind the counter, her lean, brown face with its cheek-cords pressing in the corners of her mouth, hovering over his head, righteous and suspicious. Quite invisible as he was in the shadow, he could not keep from cringing a little against

the roof as she stood there in the doorway, breathing and resting.

Town hall clanged a single note, full and round, and as if in answer another note came and hung among the leaves, a high, unmodulated animal-cry, torn carelessly from the tissues of a throat. The austere silhouette in the doorway straightened and disappeared.

"O, my God!" Va Di breathed. As a boy he had always been sent to play with neighbor children on those days when brothers or sisters accrued to his family, and so he did not know. He had supposed he knew; he had had a leg broken once by a jibing boom, and he had seen plenty of men crushed or torn in the bad seconds of ocean fishing. But they had always screamed like human beings.

The distracted ululation was in the trees again.

"Don't," the man whispered. "For Christ's sake, M-a-m-i-e—don't!"

He got down and tried to walk away, but found himself back again, leaning his crossed arms on the sty roof. He had to be doing something, to dull the blade of that outcry, and so he made up an unearthly anger at those shadows moving against the window-squares.

"Damn you to hell!" he mumbled, shaking his

white fist. "Why don't y'u *do* somethin'? Why don't y'u *do* somethin'?"

He was aware of Baldy Minn's figure flapping out of the door, a yawling cat held at arm's length. He watched her slay the little beast, make some horrible business with a kitchen knife, and flap into the house again with the warm liver. He knew well enough that this would soothe the sufferer a little, tied with a cord around her neck, but he became more than ever furious at the shadowy transaction. He did not want Mamie's agony allayed a little; he wanted it stopped, definitely and forever. He stood up and bawled after the retreating midwife: "Ow! Ow! Ow!" Baldy Minn turned and peered into the night, wondering, shook the fleshly pendants of her head, crossed her billowy bosom with the hand that contained the liver, and slammed the door shut.

Without any clear transition, his hate shifted from "them" to "it." It was "it" that was tearing and killing Mamie.

"Damn it—I'd like to—" The finger-nails ate into his palms. He hoped that "it" would die—that "it" would be a "six-monther," so there could be no possibility of its not dying. "Her and I would be—" His ravening speculations tumbled on into giddy chaos.

The night was laced with threads of agony, exquisite, racking, prolonged, still prolonged. Va Di reached out and gripped either edge of the roof, as if to keep himself from sliding. He pleaded with it to stop. The interstices among the leaves of the overhanging willows were filled with the gore of imminent day; Ma Deutra's rooster crowed in his hollow house away down a flushing lane. But still that haggard utterance hung over the world.

It ceased. A faint breeze came to life and wandered across the back yards, tumbling papers; a lark, as though bribed and timed, mounted into the sky and whistled his morning triumph; Va Di's head sank down on his arms, his knees caved in to rest against the side of the sty, and his fingers fell out flat on the shingles.

He opened his eyes by and by to find Rosie Courier standing in the horizontal radiance of the sun, regarding him from the other side of the pen. Her face was the color of a dusty boot, lifeless and flabby.

"She wants to see you," she said.

"Who? *Her?*"

She nodded stiffly, allowed the thick, mottled lids to droop over her eyes, and turned back toward the kitchen door. Va Di followed. In

the kitchen Baldy Minn sat beside the sink, her hands working in a huge blossom of suds. The tight little nubbin of hair had shaken down off the bald spot, lending her a curious expression of wildness.

"Was it—did—" Va Di groped for words. "Did it live, Baldy Minn?"

"Did it *live*?" Her eyes rolled in their liquor, her whole person quivered and dashed against its margins, and she grinned at him, closing the rent in her teeth with a meaning tongue-tip "Did it *live*? Ho-ho-ho!"

He turned away and followed Rosie Courier through a dark passage, smelling of life and death, and entered a room full of sunshine. Within the door a profound embarrassment laid hold of him; he shifted from foot to foot and looked down at the great hat revolving in his hands. Mamie was so white and still and all eyes, and the eyes dwelt upon him with such a spent and inscrutable adoration. He was afraid to look at her; he felt curiously like a figure done in clay, destructible and worthless. Her hand, all the opacity burned out of it, lay on the flowered "comfortable," and remembering suddenly how it came out to him from last night's window, he fell down on his knees and laid his cheek against it and wept the tears of weakness.

"Mamie," he sobbed in the wadding. "You're a good girl, M-m-mamie."

After a little a sound of snickering behind him brought him to his feet, his face flaming. It was Baldy Minn, almost filling the doorway with her oceanic being, against which the bundle in her arms seemed incredibly tiny and helpless. She advanced, undulating and bubbling, to lay it across Va Di's hastily crooked arms, laughing at his panic.

He held his chin stiff and his eyes desperately horizontal. "Naw, naw!" he mumbled. "Somebody come." He turned to Mamie, appealing, and Mamie, moved by that irresponsible humor which is deeper than solemnity, smiled.

"Ton'," she whispered, unsteadily. "It's kill-in', Ton'—how he favors you. It makes me laugh, Ton'—you without the mustache, *exactly*. I wish'd you'd look, Ton'."

His knees were no good; he sat down in a rocker and looked around the room for mental help. Rosie Courier, standing, a black, unimpeachable spire, beside the bureau, gave him none. Her lids were lowered and her thoughts had turned inward for refuge. By an irony, he had to come to Baldy Minn. Dirty, evil-fleshed, full of matter prurient, there still endured in

her a flicker of that essential fire that lives, somehow, through all the changing winds of orthodoxies. She had to express it, of course, in her own way.

"You old devil!" she bubbled, benevolently. "I might o' knowed . . ."

The bundle in Va Di's arms became articulate, demanding its primal planetary food. The man's muscles suffered a poignant sensation of combat, a gentle struggle with an infinitesimal kicking. His face became pink; his mouth muscles contracted in that species of self-conscious smirk so hard for others to bear; he opened and closed his lips tentatively, as though they were quite new and uncertain of their powers.

"He's—he's—he's a *s-s-stout* little bastard," he stammered, in all innocence.

THE YELLOW CAT

At least once in my life I have had the good fortune to board a deserted vessel at sea. I say "good fortune" because it has left me the memory of a singular impression. I have felt a ghost of the same thing two or three times since then, when peeping through the doorway of an abandoned house.

Now that vessel was not dead. She was a good vessel, a sound vessel, even a handsome vessel, in her blunt-bowed, coastwise way. She sailed under four lowers across as blue and glittering a sea as I have ever known, and there was not a point in her sailing that one could lay a finger upon as wrong. And yet, passing that schooner at two miles, one knew, somehow, that no hand was on her wheel. Sometimes I can imagine a vessel, stricken like that, moving over the empty spaces of the sea, carrying it off quite well were it not for that indefinable suggestion of a stagger; and I can think of all those ocean gods, in whom no landsman will ever believe, looking at one another and tapping their foreheads with just the shadow of a smile.

I wonder if they all scream—these ships that have lost their souls? Mine screamed. We heard her voice, like nothing I have ever heard before, when we rowed under her counter to read her name—the *Marionnette* it was, of Halifax. I remember how it made me shiver, there

in the full blaze of the sun, to her her going on so, railing and screaming in that stark fashion. And I remember, too, how our footsteps, pattering through the vacant internals in search of that haggard utterance, made me think of the footsteps of hurrying warders roused in the night.

And we found a parrot in a cage; that was all. It wanted water. We gave it water and went away to look things over, keeping pretty close together, all of us. In the quarters the table was set for four. Two men had begun to eat, by the evidences of the plates. Nowhere in the vessel was there any sign of disorder, except one seachest broken out, evidently in haste. Her papers were gone and the stern davits were empty. That is how the case stood that day, and that is how it has stood to this. I saw this same *Marionnette* a week later, tied up to a Hoboken dock, where she awaited news from her owners; but even there, in the midst of all the water-front bustle, I could not get rid of the feeling that she was still very far away—in a sort of shippish other-world.

The thing happens now and then. Sometimes half a dozen years will go by without a solitary wanderer of this sort crossing the ocean paths, and then in a single season perhaps several of them will turn up: vacant waifs, impassive and mysterious—a quarter-column of tidings tucked away on the second page of the evening paper.

That is where I read the story about the *Abbie Rose*. I recollect how painfully awkward

and out-of-place it looked there, cramped between ruled black edges and smelling of landsman's ink—this thing that had to do essentially with air and vast colored spaces. I forget the exact words of the heading—something like "Abandoned Craft Picked Up at Sea"—but I still have the clipping itself, couched in the formal patter of the marine-news writer:

The first hint of another mystery of the sea came in today when the schooner *Abbie Rose* dropped anchor in the upper river, manned only by a crew of one. It appears that the out-bound freighter *Mercury* sighted the *Abbie Rose* off Rock Island on Thursday last, acting in a suspicious manner. A boat-party sent aboard found the schooner in perfect order and condition, sailing under four lower sails, the topsails being pursed up to the mastheads but not stowed. With the exception of a yellow cat, the vessel was found to be utterly deserted, though her small boat still hung in the davits. No evidences of disorder were visible in any part of the craft. The dishes were washed up, the stove in the galley was still slightly warm to the touch, everything in its proper place with the exception of the vessel's papers, which were not to be found.

All indications being for fair weather, Captain Rohmer of the *Mercury* detailed two of his company to bring the find back to this port, a distance of one hundred and fifteen miles. The only man available with a knowledge of the fore-and-aft rig was Stewart McCord, the second engineer. A seaman by the name of Bjørnsen was sent with him. McCord arrived this noon, after a very heavy voyage five days, reporting that Bjørnsen had fallen overboard while shaking out the foretopsail. McCord himself showed evidences of the hardships he has passed through, being almost a nervous wreck.

Stewart McCord! Yes, Stewart McCord would have a knowledge of the fore-and-aft rig, or of almost anything else connected with the affairs

of the sea. It happened that I used to know this fellow. I had even been quite chummy with him in the old days—that is, to the extent of drinking too many beers with him in certain hot-country ports. I remembered him as a stolid and deliberate sort of a person, with an amazing hodgepodge of learning, a stamp collection, and a theory about the effects of tropical sunshine on the Caucasian race, to which I have listened half of more than one night, stretched out naked on a freighter's deck. He had not impressed me as a fellow who would be bothered by his nerves.

And there was another thing about the story which struck me as rather queer. Perhaps it is a relic of my seafaring days, but I have always been a conscientious reader of the weather reports; and I could remember no weather in the past week sufficient to shake a man out of a top, especially a man by the name of Björnson—a thoroughgoing seafaring name.

I was destined to hear more of this in the evening, from the ancient boatman who rowed me out on the upper river. He had been to sea in his day. He knew enough to wonder about this thing, even to indulge in a little superstitious awe about it.

“No sir-ee. Something *happened* to them four chaps. And another thing—”

I fancied I heard a sea-bird whining in the darkness overhead. A shape moved out of the gloom ahead, passed to the left, lofty and silent, and merged once more with the gloom behind—

a barge at anchor, with the sea-grass clinging around her water-line.

"Funny about that other chap," the old fellow speculated. "Björnsen—I b'lieve he called 'im. Now that story sounds to me kind of—" He feathered his oars with a suspicious jerk and peered at me. "This McCord a friend of yourn?" he inquired.

"In a way," I said.

"Hm-m—well—" He turned on his thwart to squint ahead. "There she is," he announced, with something of relief, I thought.

It was hard at that time of night to make anything but a black blotch out of the *Abbie Rose*. Of course I could see that she was pot-bellied, like the rest of the coastwise sisterhood. And that McCord had not stowed his topsails. I could make them out, pursed at the mast-heads and hanging down as far as the cross-trees, like huge, over-ripe pears. Then I recollected that he had found them so—probably had not touched them since; a queer way to leave tops, it seemed to me. I could see also the glowing tip of a cigar floating restlessly along the farther rail. I called: "McCord! Oh, McCord!"

The spark came swimming across the deck. "Hello! Hello, there—ah—" There was a note of querulous uneasiness there that somehow jarred with my remembrance of this man.

"Ridgeway," I explained.

He echoed the name uncertainly, still with

that suggestion of peevishness, hanging over the rail and peering down at us. "Oh! By gracious!" he exclaimed, abruptly. "I'm glad to see you, Ridgeway. I had a boatman coming out before this, but I guess—well, I guess he'll be along. By gracious! I'm glad—"

"I'll not keep you," I told the gnome, putting the money in his palm and reaching for the rail. McCord lent me a hand on my wrist. Then when I stood squarely on the deck beside him he appeared to forget my presence, leaned forward heavily on the rail, and squinted after my waning boatman.

"Ahoy—boat!" he called out, sharply, shielding his lips with his hands. His violence seemed to bring him out of the blank, for he fell immediately to puffing strongly at his cigar and explaining in rather a shame-voiced way that he was beginning to think his own boatman had "passed him up."

"Come in and have a nip," he urged with an abrupt heartiness, clapping me on the shoulder.

"So you've—" I did not say what I had intended. I was thinking that in the old days McCord had made rather a fetish of touching nothing stronger than beer. Neither had he been of the shoulder-clapping sort. "So you've got something aboard?" I shifted.

"Dead men's liquor," he chuckled. It gave me a queer feeling in the pit of my stomach to hear him. I began to wish I had not come, but there was nothing for it now but to follow him into the after-house. The cabin itself might

have been nine feet square, with three bunks occupying the port side. To the right opened the master's state-room, and a door in the forward bulkhead led to the galley.

I took in these features at a casual glance. Then, hardly knowing why I did it, I began to examine them with greater care.

"Have you a match?" I asked. My voice sounded very small, as though something unheard of had happened to all the air.

"Smoke?" he asked. "I'll get you a cigar."

"No." I took the proffered match, scratched it on the side of the galley door, and passed out. There seemed to be a thousand pans there, throwing my match back at me from every wall of the box-like compartment. Even McCord's eyes, in the doorway, were large and round and shining. He probably thought me crazy. Perhaps I was, a little. I ran the match along close to the ceiling and came upon a rusty hook a little apart of the center.

"There," I said. "Was there anything hanging from this—er—say a parrot—or something, McCord?" The match burned my fingers and went out.

"What do you mean?" McCord demanded from the doorway. I got myself back into the comfortable yellow glow of the cabin before I answered, and then it was a question.

"Do you happen to know anything about this craft's personal history?"

"No. What are you talking about! Why?"

"Well, I do," I offered. "For one thing, she's changed her name. And it happens this isn't the first time she's— Well, damn it all, fourteen years ago I helped pick up this whatever-she-is off the Virginia Capes—in the same sort of condition. There you are!" I was yapping like a nerve-strung puppy.

McCord leaned forward with his hands on the table, bringing his face beneath the fan of the hanging-lamp. For the first time I could mark how shockingly it had changed. It was almost colorless. The jaw had somehow lost its old-time security and the eyes seemed to be loose in their sockets. I had expected him to start at my announcement; he only blinked at the light.

"I am not surprised," he remarked at length. "After what I've seen and heard—" He lifted his fist and brought it down with a sudden crash on the table. "Man—let's have a nip!"

He was off before I could say a word, fumbling out of sight in the narrow state-room. Presently he reappeared, holding a glass in either hand and a dark bottle hugged between his elbows. Putting the glasses down, he held up the bottle between his eyes and the lamp, and its shadow, falling across his face, green and luminous at the core, gave him a ghastly look—like a mutilation or an unspeakable birth-mark. He shook the bottle gently and chuckled his "Dead men's liquor" again. Then he poured two half-glasses of the clear gin, swallowed his portion, and sat down.

"A parrot," he mused, a little of the liquor's

color creeping into his cheeks. "No, this time it was a cat, Ridgeway. A yellow cat. She was—"

"Was?" I caught him up. "What's happened—what's become of her?"

"Vanished. Evaporated. I haven't seen her since night before last, when I caught her trying to lower the boat—"

"*Stop it!*" It was I who banged the table now, without any of the reserve of decency. "McCord, you're drunk—*drunk*, I tell you. A cat! Let a cat throw you off your head like this! She's probably hiding out below this minute, on affairs of her own."

"Hiding?" He regarded me for a moment with the queer superiority of the damned. "I guess you don't realize how many times I've been over this hulk, from decks to keelson, with a mallet and a foot-rule."

"Or fallen overboard," I shifted, with less assurance. "Like this fellow Björnsen. By the way, McCord—" I stopped there on account of the look in his eyes.

He reached out, poured himself a shot, swallowed it, and got up to shuffle about the confined quarters. I watched their restless circuit—my friend and his jumping shadow. He stopped and bent forward to examine a Sunday-supplement chromo tacked on the wall, and the two heads drew together, as though there were something to whisper. Of a sudden I seemed to hear the old gnome croaking. "Now that story sounds to me kind of—"

McCord straightened up and turned to face me.

"What do you know about Bjørnsen?" he demanded.

"Well—only what they had you saying in the papers." I told him.

"Pshaw!" He snapped his fingers, tossing the affair aside. "I found her log," he announced in quite another voice.

"You did, eh? I judged, from what I read in the paper, that there wasn't a sign."

"No, no; I happened on this the other night, under the mattress in there." He jerked his head toward the state-room. "Wait!" I heard him knocking things over in the dark and mumbling at them. After a moment he came out and threw on the table a long, cloth-covered ledger, of the common commercial sort. It lay open at about the middle, showing close script running indiscriminately across the column ruling.

"When I said 'log,'" he went on, "I guess I was going it a little strong. At least, I wouldn't want that sort of log found around *my* vessel. Let's call it a personal record. Here's his picture, somewhere—" He shook the book by its back and a common kodak blue-print fluttered to the table. It was the likeness of a solid man with a paunch, a huge square beard, small squinting eyes, and a bald head. "What do you make of him—a writing chap?"

"From the nose down, yes," I estimated.

"From the nose up, he will 'tend to his own business if you will 'tend to yours, strictly."

McCord slapped his thigh. "By gracious! that's the fellow! He hates the Chinaman. He knows as well as anything he ought not to put down in black and white how intolerably he hates the Chinaman, and yet he must sneak off to his cubby-hole and suck his pencil, and—how is it Stevenson has it?—the 'agony of composition,' you remember. Can you imagine the fellow, Ridgeway, bundling down here with the fever on him—"

"About the Chinaman," I broke in. "I think you said something about a Chinaman?"

"Yes. The cook, he must have been. I gather he wasn't the master's pick, by the reading-matter here. Probably clapped on to him by the owners—shifted from one of their others at the last moment; a queer trick. Listen." He picked up the book and, running over the pages with a selective thumb, read:

August second.—First part, moderate southwest-erly breeze—

and so forth—er—but here he comes to it:

Anything can happen to a man at sea, even a funeral. In special to a Chinyman, who is of no account to social welfare, being a barbarian as I look at it.

"Something of a philosopher, you see. And did you get the reserve in that 'even a funeral'? An artist, I tell you. But wait: let me catch him a bit wilder. Here:

I'll get that mustard-colored —— [This is back a couple of days.] Never can hear the —— coming, in them carpet slippers. Turned round and found him standing right to my back this morning. Could have stuck a knife into me easy. "Look here!" says I, and fetched him a tap on the ear that will make him walk louder next time, I warrant. He could have stuck a knife into me easy.

"A clear case of moral funk, I should say. Can you imagine the fellow, Ridgeway—"

"Yes; oh, yes." I was ready with a phrase of my own. "A man handicapped with an imagination. You see he can't quite understand this 'barbarian,' who has him beaten by about thirty centuries of civilization—and his imagination has to have something to chew on, something to hit—a 'tap on the ear.' you know."

"By gracious! that's the ticket!" McCord pounded his knee. "And now we've got another chap going to pieces—Peters, he calls him. Refuses to eat dinner on August the third, claiming he caught the Chink making passes over the chowder-pot with his thumb. Can you believe it, Ridgeway—in this very cabin here?" Then he went on with a suggestion of haste, as though he had somehow made a slip. "Well, at any rate, the disease seemes to be catching. Next day it's Bach, the second seaman, who begins to feel the gaff. Listen:

Bach he comes to me tonight, complaining he's being watched. He claims the —— has got the evil eye. Says he can see you through a two-inch bulkhead, and the like. The Chink's laying in his bunk, turned the other way. Why don't you go aboard of him? says I. The Dutcher says nothing, but goes over to his own bunk and feels under

the straw. When he comes back he's looking queer. "By God!" says he, "the devil has swiped my gun!" . . . Now if that's true there is going to be hell to pay in this vessel very quick. I figure I'm still master of this vessel.

"The evil eye," I grunted. "Consciences gone wrong there somewhere."

"Not altogether, Ridgeway. I can see that yellow man peeking. Now just figure yourself, say, eight thousand miles from home, out on the water alone with a crowd of heathen fanatics crazy from fright, looking around for guns and so on. Don't you believe you'd keep an eye around the corners, kind of—eh? I'll bet a hat he was taking it all in, lying there in his bunk, 'turned the other way.' Eh? I pity the poor cuss—Well, there's only one more entry after that. He's good and mad. Here:

Now, by God! this is the end. My gun's gone, too; right out from under lock and key, by God! I been talking with Bach this morning. Not to let on, I had him into clean my lamp. There's more ways than one, he says, and so do I.

McCord closed the book and dropped it on the table. "Finis," he said. "The rest is blank paper."

"Well!" I will confess I felt much better than I had for some time past. "There's *one* 'mystery of the sea' gone to pot, at any rate. And now, if you don't mind, I think I'll have another of your nips, McCord."

He pushed my glass across the table and got up, and behind his back his shadow rose to scour the corners of the room, like an incor-

ruptible sentinel. I forgot to take up my gin, watching him. After an uneasy minute or so he came back to the table and pressed the tip of a forefinger on the book.

"Ridgeway," he said, "you don't seem to understand. This particular 'mystery of the sea' hasn't been scratched yet—not even *scratched*, Ridgeway." He sat down and leaned forward, fixing me with a didactic finger. "What happened?"

"Well, I have an idea the 'barbarian' got them, when it came to the pinch."

"And let the—remains over the side?"

"I should say."

"And they came back and got the 'barbarian' and let *him* over the side, eh? There were none left, you remember."

"Oh, good Lord, I don't know!" I flared with a childish resentment at this catechizing of his. But his finger remained there, challenging.

"I do," he announced. "The Chinaman put them over the side, as we have said. And then, after that, he died—of wounds about the head."

"So?" I had still sarcasm.

"You will remember, he went on, "that the skipper did not happen to mention a cat, a *yellow* cat, in his confessions."

"McCord," I begged him, "please drop it. Why in thunder *should* he mention a cat?"

"True. Why *should* he mention a cat? I think one of the reasons why he should *not*

mention a cat is because there did not happen to be a cat aboard at that time."

"Oh, all right!" I reached out and pulled the bottle to my side of the table. Then I took out my watch. "If you don't mind," I suggested, "I think we'd better be going ashore. I've got to get to my office rather early in the morning. What do you say?"

He said nothing for the moment, but his finger had dropped. He leaned back and stared straight into the core of the light above, his eyes squinting.

"He would have been from the south of China, probably." He seemed to be talking to himself. "There's a considerable sprinkling of the belief down there, I've heard. It's an uncanny business—this transmigration of souls—"

Personally, I had had enough of it. McCord's fingers came groping across the table for the bottle. I picked it up hastily and let it go through the open companionway, where it died with a faint gurgle, out somewhere on the river.

"Now," I said to him, shaking the vagrant wrist, "either you come ashore with me or you go in there and get under the blankets. You're drunk, McCord—*drunk*. Do you hear me?"

"Ridgeway," he pronounced, bringing his eyes down to me and speaking very slowly. "You're a fool, if you can't see better than that. I'm not drunk. I'm sick. I haven't slept for three nights—and now I can't. And you say—you—" He went to pieces very suddenly,

jumped up, pounded the legs of his chair on the decking, and shouted at me: "And you say that, you—you landlubber, you office coddler! You're so comfortable sure that everything in the world is cut and dried. Come back to the water again and learn how to wonder—and stop talking like a damn fool. Do you know where— Is there anything in your municipal budget to tell me where Bjørnsen went? Listen!" He sat down, waving me to do the same, and went on with a sort of desperate repression.

"It happened on the first night after we took this hellion. I'd stood the wheel most of the afternoon—off and on, that is, because she sails herself uncommonly well. Just put her on a reach, you know, and she carries it off pretty well—"

"I know," I nodded.

"Well, we mugged up about seven o'clock. There was a good deal of canned stuff in the galley, and Bjørnsen wasn't a bad hand with a kettle—a thoroughgoing Square-head he was—tall and lean and yellow-haired, with little fat, round cheeks and white mustache. Not a bad chap at all. He took the wheel to stand till mid-night, and I turned in, but I didn't drop off for quite a spell. I could hear his boots wandering around over my head, padding off forward, coming back again. I heard him whistling now and then—an out-landish air. Occasionally I could see the shadow of his head waving in a block of moonlight that lay on the decking right down there in front of

the state-room. It came from the companion; the cabin was dark because we were going easy on the oil. They hadn't left a great deal, for some reason or other."

McCord leaned back and described with his finger where the illumination had cut the decking.

"There! I could see it from my bunk, as I lay, you understand. I must have almost dropped off once when I heard him fiddling around out here in the cabin, and then he said something in a whisper, just to find out if I was still awake, I suppose. I asked him what the matter was. He came and poked his head in the door.

"'The breeze is going out,' says he. 'I was wondering if we couldn't get a little more sail on her.' Only I can't give you his fierce Square-head tang. 'How about the tops?' he suggested.

"I was so sleepy I didn't care, and I told him so. 'All right,' he says, 'but I thought I might shake out one of them tops.' Then I heard him blow at something outside. 'Scat, you ——!' Then: 'This cat's going to set me crazy, Mr. McCord,' he says, 'following me around everywhere.' He gave a kick, and I saw something yellow floating across the moonlight. It never made a sound—just floated. You wouldn't have known it ever lit anywhere, just like—"

McCord stopped and drummed a few beats on the table with his fist, as though to bring himself back to the straight narrative.

"I went to sleep," he began again. "I dreamed about a lot of things. I woke up sweating. You know how glad you are to wake up after a dream like that and find none of it is so? Well, I turned over and settled to go off again, and then I got a little more awake and thought to myself it must be pretty near time for me to go on deck. I scratched a match and looked at my watch. 'That fellow must be either a good chap or asleep,' I said to myself. And I rolled out quick and went above-decks. He wasn't at the wheel. I called him: 'Björnsen! Björnsen!' No answer."

McCord was really telling a story now. He paused for a long moment, one hand shielding an ear and his eyeballs turned far up.

"That was the first time I really went over the hulk," he ran on. "I got out a lantern and started at the forward end of the hold, and I worked aft, and there was nothing there. Not a sign, or a stain, or a scrap of clothing, or anything. You may believe that I began to feel funny inside. I went over the decks and the rails and the house itself—inch by inch. Not a trace. I went out aft again. The cat sat on the wheel-box, washing her face. I hadn't noticed the scar on her head before, running down between her ears—rather a new scar—three or four days old, I should say. It looked ghastly and blue-white in the flat moonlight. I ran over and grabbed her up to heave her over the side—you understand how upset I was. Now you know a cat will squirm around and grab something when you hold it like that,

generally speaking. This one didn't. She just drooped and began to purr and looked up at me out of her moonlit eyes under that scar. I dropped her on the deck and backed off. You remember Bjørnsen had *kicked* her—and I didn't want anything like that happening to—"

The narrator turned upon me with a sudden heat, leaned over and shook his finger before my face.

"There you go!" he cried. "You, with your stout stone buildings and your policemen and your neighborhood church—you're so damn sure. But I'd just like to see you out there, alone, with the moon setting, and all the lights gone tall and queer, and a shipmate—" He lifted his hand overhead, the finger-tips pressed together and then suddenly separated as though he had released an impalpable something into the air.

"Go on," I told him.

"I felt more like you do, when it got right again, and warm and sunshiny. I said 'Bah!' to the whole business. I even fed the cat, and I slept awhile on the roof of the house—I was so sure. We lay dead most of the day, without a streak of air. But that night—! Well, that night I hadn't got over being sure yet. It takes quite a jolt, you know, to shake loose several dozen generations. A fair, steady breeze had come along, the glass was high, she was staying herself like a doll, and so I figured I could get a little rest, lying below in the bunk, even if I didn't sleep.

"I tried not to sleep, in case something should come up—a squall or the like. But I think I must have dropped off once or twice. I remember I heard something fiddling around in the galley, and I hollered 'Scat!' and everything was quiet again. I rolled over and lay on my left side, staring at that square of moonlight outside my door for a long time. You'll think it was a dream—what I saw there."

"Go on," I said.

"Call this table-top the spot of light, roughly," he said. He placed a finger-tip about the middle of the forward edge and drew it slowly toward the center. "Here, what would correspond with the upper side of the companion-way, there came down very gradually the shadow of a tail. I watched it streaking out there across the deck, wiggling the slightest bit now and then. When it had come down about half-way across the light, the solid part of the animal—its shadow, you understand—began to appear, quite big and round. But how could she hang there, done up in a ball, from the hatch?"

He shifted his finger back to the edge of the table and puddled it around to signify the shadowed body.

"I fished my gun out from behind my back. You see, I was feeling funny again. Then I started to slide one foot over the edge of the bunk, always with my eyes on that shadow. Now I swear I didn't make the sound of a pin

dropping; but I had no more than moved a muscle when that shadowed thing twisted itself around in a flash—and there on the floor before me was the profile of a man's head, upside down, listening—a man's head with a tail of hair."

McCord got up hastily and stepped over in front of the state-room door, where he bent down and scratched a match.

"See," he said, holding the tiny flame above a splintered scar on the boards. "You wouldn't think a man would be fool enough to shoot at a shadow?"

He came back and sat down.

"It seemed to me all hell had shaken loose. You've no idea, Ridgeway, the rumpus a gun raises in a box like this. I found out afterward the slug ricocheted into the galley, bringing down a couple of pans—and that helped. Oh, yes, I got out of here quick enough. I stood there, half out of the companion, with my hands on the hatch and the gun between them, and my shadow running off across the top of the house shivering before my eyes like a dry leaf. There wasn't a whisper of sound in the world—just the pale water floating past and the sails towering up like a pair of twittering ghosts. And everything that crazy color—

"Well, in a minute I saw it, just abreast of the mainmast, crouched down in the shadow of the weather rail sneaking off forward very

slowly This time I took a good long sight before I let go. Did you ever happen to see black-powder smoke in the moonlight? It puffed out perfectly round, like a big pale balloon, this did, and for a second something was bounding through it—without a sound, you understand—something a shade solider than the smoke and big as a cow, it looked to me. It passed from the weather side to the lee and ducked behind the sweep of the mainsail like *that*—” McCord snapped his thumb and forefinger under the light.

“Go on,” I said. “What did you do then?”

McCord regarded me for an instant from beneath his lids, uncertain. His fist hung above the table. “You’re—” He hesitated, his lips working vacantly. A forefinger came out of the fist and gesticulated before my face. “If you’re laughing, why, damn me, I’ll—”

“Go on,” I repeated. “What did you do then?”

“I followed the thing.” He was still watching me sullenly. “I got up and went forward along the roof of the house, so as to have an eye on either rail. You understand, this business had to be done with. I kept straight along. Every shadow I wasn’t absolutely sure of I *made* sure of—point-blank. And I rounded the thing up at the very stem—sitting on the butt of the bowsprit, Ridgeway, washing her yellow face under the moon. I didn’t make any bones about it this time. I put the bad end

of that gun against the scar on her head and squeezed the trigger. It snicked on an empty shell. I tell you a fact; I was almost deafened by the report that didn't come.

"She followed me aft. I couldn't get away from her. I went and sat on the wheel-box and she came and sat on the edge of the house, facing me. And there we stayed for upwards of an hour, without moving. Finally she went over and stuck her paw in the water-pan I'd set out for her; then she raised her head and looked at me and yawled. At sundown there'd been two quarts of water in that pan. You wouldn't think a cat could get away with two quarts of water in—"

He broke off again and considered me with a sort of weary defiance.

"What's the use?" He spread out his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. "I knew you wouldn't believe it when I statred. You *couldn't*. It would be a kind of blasphemy against the sacred institution of pavements. You're too damn smug, Ridgeway. I can't shake you. You haven't sat two days and two nights, keeping your eyes open by sheer teeth-gritting, until they got used to it and wouldn't shut any more. When I tell you I found that yellow thing snooping around the davits, and three bights of the boat-fall loosened out, plain on deck—you grin behind your collar. When I tell you she padded off forward and evaporated—flickered back to hell and hasn't been seen since then—why, you explain to yourself that I'm

drunk. I tell you—" He jerked his head back abruptly and turned to face the companion-way, his lips still apart. He listened so for a moment, then he shook himself out of it and went on:

"I tell you, Ridgeway, I've been over this hulk with a foot-rule. There's not a cubic inch I haven't accounted for, not a plank I—"

This time he got up and moved a step toward the companion, where he stood with his head bent forward and slightly to the side. After what might have been twenty seconds of this he whispered, "Do you hear?"

Far and far away down the reach a ferry-boat lifted its infinitesimal wail, and then the silence of the night river came down once more, profound and inscrutable. A corner of the wick above my head sputtered a little—that was all.

"Hear what?" I whispered back. He lifted a cautious finger toward the opening.

"Somebody. Listen."

The man's faculties must have been keyed up to the pitch of his nerves, for to me the night remained as voiceless as a subterranean cavern. I became intensely irritated with him; within my mind I cried out against this infatuated pantomime of his. And then, of a sudden, there was a sound—the dying rumor of a ripple, somewhere in the outside darkness, as

though an object had been let into the water with extreme care.

"You heard?"

I nodded. The ticking of the watch in my vest pocket came to my ears, shucking off the leisurely seconds, while McCord's finger-nails gnawed at the palms of his hands. The man was really sick. He wheeled on me and cried out, "My God! Ridgeway—why don't we go?"

I, for one, refused to be a fool. I passed him and climbed out of the opening: he followed far enough to lean his elbows on the hatch, his feet and legs still within the secure glow of the cabin.

"You see, there's nothing." My wave of assurance was possibly a little overdone.

"Over there," he muttered, jerking his head toward the shore lights. "Something swimming."

I moved to the corner of the house and listened.

"River thieves," I argued. "The place is full of—"

"Ridgeway. Look behind you!"

Perhaps it is the pavements—but no matter; I am not ordinarily a jumping sort. And yet there was something in the quality of that voice beyond my shoulder that brought the

sweat stinging though the pores of my scalp even while I was in the act of turning.

A cat sat there on the hatch, expressionless and immobile in the gloom.

I did not say anything. I turned and went below. McCord was there already, standing on the farther side of the table. After a moment or so the cat followed and sat on her haunches at the foot of the ladder and stared at us without winking.

"I think she wants something to eat," I said to McCord.

He lit a lantern and went out into the galley. Returning with a chunk of salt beef, he threw it into the farther corner. The cat went over and began to tear at it, her muscles playing with convulsive shadow-lines under the sagging yellow hide.

And now it was she who listened, to something beyond the reach of even McCord's faculties, her neck stiff and her ears flattened. I looked at McCord and found him brooding at the animal with a sort of listless malevolence. "Quick! She has kittens somewhere about." I shook his elbow sharply. "When she starts, now—"

"You dont seem to understand," he mumbled. "It wouldn't be any use."

She had turned now and was making for the ladder with the soundless agility of her race.

I grasped McCord's wrist and dragged him after me, the lantern hanging against his knees. When we came up the cat was already amidships, a scarcely discernible shadow at the margin of our lantern's ring. She stopped and looked back at us with her luminous eyes, appeared to hesitate, uneasy at our pursuit of her, shifted here and there with quick, soft bounds, and stopped to fawn with her back arched at the foot of the mast. Then she was off with an amazing suddenness into the shadows forward.

"Lively now!" I yelled at McCord. He came pounding along behind me, still protesting that it was of no use. Abreast of the foremast I took the lantern from him to hold above my head.

"You see," he complained, peering here and there over the illuminated deck. "I tell you, Ridgeway, this thing—" But my eyes were in another quarter, and I slapped him on the shoulder.

"An engineer—an engineer to the core," I cried at him. "Look aloft, man."

Our quarry was almost to the cross-trees, clambering up the shrouds with a smartness no sailor has ever come to, her yellow body, cut by the moving shadows of the ratlines, a queer sight against the mat of the night. McCord closed his mouth and opened it again for two words: "By gracious!" The following instant he had the lantern and was after her. I

watched him go up above my head—a ponderous, swaying climber into the sky—come to the cross-trees, and squat there with his knees clamped around the mast. The clear star of the lantern shot this way and that for a moment, then it disappeared, and in its place there sprang out a bag of yellow light, like a fire-balloon at anchor in the heavens. I could see the shadows of his head and hands moving monstrously over the inner surface of the sail, and muffled exclamations without meaning came down to me. After a moment he drew out his head and called: “All right—they’re here. Heads! there below!”

I ducked at his warning, and something spanked on the planking a yard from my feet. I stepped over to the vague blur on the deck and picked up a slipper—a slipper covered with some woven straw stuff and soled with a matted felt, perhaps a half-inch thick. Another struck somewhere abaft the mast, and then McCord reappeared above and began to stagger down the shrouds. Under his left arm he hugged a curious assortment of litter, a sheaf of papers, a brace of revolvers, a gray kimono, and a soiled apron.

“Well,” he said when he had come to deck, “I feel like a man who has gone to hell and come back again. You know I’d come to the place where I really believed that about the cat. When you think of it— By gracious! we haven’t come so far from the jungle, after all.”

We went aft and below and sat down at the

table as we had been. McCord broke a prolonged silence.

"I'm sort of glad he got away—poor cuss! He's probably climbing up a wharf this minute, shivering and scared to death. Over toward the gas-tanks, by the way he was swimming. By gracious! now that the world's turned over straight again, I feel I could sleep a solid week, Poor cuss! can you imagine him, Ridgeway—"

"Yes," I broke in. "I think I can. He must have lost his nerve when he made out your smoke and shinnied up there to stow away, taking the ship's papers with him. He would have attached some profound importance to them—remember, the 'barbarian,' eight thousand miles from home. Probably couldn't read a word. I supposed the cat followed him—the traditional source of food. He must have wanted water badly."

"I should say! He wouldn't have taken the chances he did."

"Well," I announced, "at any rate, I can say it now—there's another 'mystery of the sea' gone to pot."

McCord lifted his heavy lids.

"No," he mumbled. "This mystery is that a man who has been to sea all his life could sail around for three days with a man bundled up in his top and not know it. When I think of him peeking down at me—and playing off that damn cat—probably without realizing it—

scared to death—by gracious! Ridgeway, there was a pair of funks aboard this craft, eh? Wow—yow—I could sleep—”

“I should think you could.”

McCord did not answer.

“By the way,” I speculated. “I guess you were right about Björnsen, McCord—that is, his fooling with the foretop. He must have been caught all of a bunch, eh?”

Again McCord failed to answer. I looked up, mildly surprised, and found his mouth opened wide. He was asleep.

POPULAR LITTLE BLUE BOOKS

- 220 Senator Vest's Tribute to a Dog and Other
Dog Lore
- 1170 Funny Ghost Stories. Jerome K. Jerome
- 901 Woman: The Eternal Primitive.
Wm. J. Fielding
- 229 Ridiculous Women: Comedy of French Life.
Moliere
- 410 Amorous Misadventures. Restif de la Bretonne
- 810 Some Polite Scandals of Parisian Life
- 404 Romances of Paris. Alfred de Musset
- 1062 Humoresque. Fannie Hurst
- 1115 Ridiculous Stories. Stephen Leacock
- 659 Two Famous Stories. Theodore Dreiser
- 661 Neurotic America and the Sex Impulse.
Dreiser
- 865 Main Street Tales. Sherwood Anderson
- 866 Untold Lie and Other Tales. Anderson
- 698 Tales of Chicago Streets. Ben Hecht
- 699 Broken Necks and Other City Tales.
Ben Hecht
- 540 Brightly Colored Tales of Love.
Remy de Gourmont
- 541 Passion Stories of Many Hues.
Remy de Gourmont
- 1202 Forbidden Love and Other Stories.
Barry Pain
- 1194 Love's Heroism and Other Tales
- 317 Flirtation in the Night and Other Tales.
Chekhov
- 23 Great Stories of the Sea
- 145 Great Ghost Stories
- 938 French Tales of Passion and Cruelty
- 178 One of Cleopatra's Nights. Theophile Gautier
- 230 The Quest for a Blonde Mistress. Gautier.
- 58 Tales from Boccaccio's Decameron
- 12 Tales of Mystery. Edgar Allan Poe
- 102 Sherlock Holmes Tales. Conan Doyle
- 783 Mandalay and Other Poems. Rudyard Kipling
- 795 Gunga Din and Other Poems. Kipling
- 222 The Vampire and Other Poems. Kipling
- 815 A Book of Familiar Quotations
- 367 How to Improve Your Conversation

- 82 Common Faults in Writing English
- 697 4,000 Words Often Mispronounced
- 821 How to Improve Your Vocabulary
- 1103 A Book of Puzzles and Brain teasers
- 1210 A Book of Mathematical Oddities
- 167 General Rules for Everyday Health
- 74 Physiology of Sex Life. Dr. Greer
- 1 The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam
- 556 Hints on Etiquette. Esther Floyd
- 1219 How to Make Your Home More Homelike
- 364 How to Argue Logically. Schopenhauer
- 185 The Gods. Robert G. Ingersoll
- 4 The Age of Reason. Thomas Paine
- 27 The Last Days of a Condemned Man.
Victor Hugo
- 160 The Wit and Wisdom of Voltaire
- 1231 The Best Jokes of 1926
- 389 Jokes and Clever Sayings About Kissing
- 29 Dreams: Short Stories of Passion's Pawns
- 314 Short Stories of French Life. Daudet
- 954 A Bath and Other French Tales. Emile Zola
- 893 Five Hundred Riddles
- 830 A Book of Crossword Puzzles
- 1253 General Information Quizzes
- 868 Some General Hints on Self-Improvement
- 166 English As She Is Spoke. Mark Twain
- 668 Humorous Fables. Mark Twain
- 422 Book of Best Yankee Jokes
- 287 Best Jokes About Doctors
- 112 Secret of Self-Development. J. C. Powys
- 855 How to Write Letters for All Occasions
- 56 Dictionary of American Slang
- 972 Popular Joke Book
- 382 Wit and Wisdom of Abraham Lincoln
- 738 Poor Richard's Almanac. Ben Franklin
- 1089 The Common Sense of Sex. Oppenheim

ORDER BY NUMBER: Your choice 5c each, plus 1c per book for packing and carriage charges. Order by number. Complete catalogue free on request.

HALDEMAN-JULIUS PUBLICATIONS,

Dept. S-25,

Girard, Kansas

